Photograph courtesy of Dal Neitzel of Lummi Island.

This interview was conducted with Ann Morris at her studio, Sculpture Woods, Lummi Island, Washington on August 12, 2021. The interviewer is Elizabeth Joffrion, Associate Professor and Director of Heritage Resources, Western Libraries, Western Washington University.

Elizabeth Joffrion: I'm Elizabeth Joffrion, Director of Heritage Resources at Western Washington University. Today is August 12, 2021. And we're out on Lummi Island at the estate studio of Ann Morris. And it's commonly known as Sculpture Woods. We're going to be talking with Ann today about her childhood growing up, what brought her into the arts, the trajectory of your art career as well as the development of Sculpture Woods. And perhaps even a little bit about the donation to Western and what you aspire for with that donation.

Ann, do I have your permission to record the interview?

Ann Morris: Yes, you do.

Joffrion: All right, great. Thank you. And I want to thank you for doing the interview with us today and for all of your hospitality over the last few weeks. It's been lovely to be here, to be in this beautiful space and to have a chance to get to know you. We've talked about a few questions that we're going to go over together.

Morris: We have.

Joffrion: We'll run through those and hopefully explore some things maybe even that we haven't talked about--but keeping to the topics at hand. So, let's jump in. Let's start out. Talk a little bit about your

childhood, your upbringing, what exposure you had to the creative arts and what brought you into the creative arts, as a profession and an avocation.

Morris: Well, it all took a long time. But I was very fortunate. My mother was a very accomplished watercolor artist. And before she was married, she actually went to art school and pursued a small career that way. And then my father was an inventor, and always, wherever we lived, he had a shop.

And so, there were times when I would want him to do something for me, or he would say, come, I need your help. Hold on the end of this board. We're going to cut it off. And I would go to him occasionally and say, oh, I really would like you to help me make so-and-so.

And he would say, "well, what size should it be?" And I said, "oh, about this size." And I would hold my hands out at 12 inches, 16. I mean, he would be hysterical, because everything was supposed to be measured and exact. And for me, nothing is ever measured and exact.

But he was tolerant, and we had a good time together. And so, we spent a lot of our time moving. I was born in New York City and stayed there for about six months, and we kept moving west. During the war, he was in the Air Corps and so we moved to Ohio where he was stationed at Wright-Patterson Field. And then we moved from there to Iowa where he opened a division of Collins Radio. And so, there were always projects in the works.

And then as a child, I was always interested in making things. In the old days where you could go-- in your cereal box, you'd get a means of making a model. You pour this into that, or-- I mean, and I always loved doing that kind of stuff. And so, I think making things and collecting things has always been a real part of my arrangement.

And when I was probably 12 to 14, something like that in there, what I would do-- well, friends of mine and I, what we would do is we would go around the neighborhood and collect roadkill. And then we would bring it home. And typically, it was birds. But in any event, we would have-- we'd get a little shoe box, and we would make something special for it, a little nest or something and put it in there. And then we would bury it.

And then we would-- once it's buried, we'd put little things around. It was a little monument. And then I was the one that always wanted to dig it up to find out what happened after it had been in the ground for a while. So that was very fun. Anything more specific that you'd like to know?

Joffrion: Your mom was an artist, too, wasn't she?

Morris: Yes, she was. And my father was so busy working. He really didn't have a very large social aspect to his personality. And I think she would have loved to have been invited to dances and do fun things like that. And so that kind of didn't develop for her life. And it was at a time when people didn't travel very much. I mean, when we were little, there was no such thing as a restaurant. We never went out to dinner. What are you talking about?

Anyway, but what she would do, she had another friend who was also a watercolor artist, and they would pack their things up in the suitcase and go off for the day and enjoy themselves out in the farmland. And so, she produced a lot of work of her own.

Joffrion: Was she mostly a painter?

Morris: - Yes. Right.

Joffrion: You mentioned in one of your writings that your dad was a problem solver and your mother created things that didn't solve problems. That she had a more delicate approach to the world.

Morris: Oh, yeah. Yeah. I mean, her approach was, I would say, almost strictly visual. How does this color change when the shadows come, etc. And my father's solution was why does this work the way it works? Or why doesn't it work? I want to know exactly why. That kind of thing.

Joffrion: Did both of their approaches influence your creativity as a child? Did it help you to--

Morris: Oh, I think it must have. I mean, there was never any direct effort in that regard. I mean, I was just supposed to do my own thing. But oh, I'm sure. Definitely. And my mother was a very attentive observer. I mean, she really loved flowers, and the natural order of things. And, so I think she taught me to see the world, the natural world, more accurately. I don't know that my father ever paid any attention to the natural world.

Joffrion: Well, and the natural world has played a huge part in your art. Let's talk a little bit about some of your educational influences and the philosophical influences that have informed your art over the years.

Morris: Well, I remember, well, two things that happened. One, when I was in high school, we lived right across-- in Pasadena, California we lived right across from Caltech. And one-- they had right in front of our doorway across the street the astronomy department.

And one day, my brother, who is six years younger than I, went outside and saw that the dome was opening, the telescope was going to be exposed. He rushed over there, and he was probably 10, and knocked on the door. He says, what's going on? Well anyway, it turned out there were two absolutely lovely graduate students who were in charge of the project. And he became friends with them, and they used to come over.

And one -- Allan Sandadge was my main friend. And he and I would sit up late at night and talk about why is the world the way the world is? It was just really delightful. And then they also liked to play checkers. And my mother could beat them at checkers every time. So, there were those kinds of fun things.

And then, let's see. I had another thought, and I can't now remember it.

Joffrion: Working with students of higher ed as a younger person, did it sort of direct your trajectory into college?

Morris: - Yeah, I think-- well, and the other thing that happened is that my father had absolutely no understanding what women might or might not do outside of marriage. And so, he discussed with me my options, and my options were either to get married or to be an airline stewardess.

And fortunately, I was too short to be an airline steward. And I was not wise enough to understand that marriage didn't have to be an option. And I wouldn't have probably had enough strength of character, experience, or anything else to have forged anything. So, we went from there.

Joffrion: How old were you when you got married?

Morris: Oh, dear. Let's see. Twenty, I guess.

Joffrion: - Twenty.

Morris: Well, we married right after we graduated in '56. And I'm now 87, so however-- whenever that was.

Joffrion: But you had a chance to finish your college degree?

Morris: Yeah. Yeah, definitely. We did that. And then he was involved with the-- oh, I can't-- whatever the program was. I can't remember the name of it. Where you could sign up for military service and get extra credits. Not credits, but financial assistance with your college education.

Joffrion: ROTC.

Morris: That's it. That's it. ROTC. And so, we got married in August and our son was conceived instantly. And he, then, was conscripted to go to Germany. And so, he had to go before I did. And finally, I was able to follow him. And so, we were there for a year and a half, and that was very interesting.

Joffrion: Why?

Morris: Well, I met a woman early on. We were not on the base at that first time. We stayed in a house in Bad Hersfeld that was a rental property, in a sense that lots of the bachelor guys could live there. And we also got to live there. And one of the women who worked there was German, and we got to be friends.

And the good news and the bad news was that she spoke English, which was delightful for me. And the bad news was that I didn't-- I mean, German was just always a nightmare for me. I mean, Agatha Christie calls German the barbed wire language, and that's-- I mean, you line up too many letters in a row and my mind shuts down.

But anyway, she was a very good friend. And so, I had kind of a little introduction into how things worked. And I was very pregnant at the time. And I remember, never thinking anything about it. I was out walking, my stomach out in front of me. And all of a sudden, this guy, this older man, stopped and just was staring at me, just-- and I later found out that pregnant women do not walk out in public, especially not alone. My friend said when she was pregnant, you couldn't even go to the movies. So, we learned a few things.

Joffrion: So, was this a period in life where you were thinking more and moving more in a direction of thinking about your own identity and what it meant to be female? Or were you also working with ideas around art, and kind of yearning after doing artwork in that period as well?

Morris: No. No, see, I think that I-- I remember one time before we got sent to Germany, we were stationed in Frankfurt-- I mean, in Kentucky while he was still in his training. And I thought, well, maybe I could be a painter, because I had always messed around with stuff. But it was never-- you know, didn't know what I was doing at all. And so, I just got some paint and a canvas, and I thought "this is absolutely terrible!" Something needs to be thought through here.

And so, I really didn't pursue that. And then when we moved back to the United States and he went to law school and my daughter was born, a friend of mine said, I'm going over to another friend's house. And she's going to teach me how to do silkscreen printmaking. I said, "oh, can I come?" And she said, "sure."

So, I went with her. And as her friend was explaining how this is done, I knew exactly what was going to happen next. I mean, it was as though I had always known how to do it. And it was perfect for me, because it had that mechanical part. You have to build your screen, you have to make it square, you have to stretch the silk, all that part. I really liked that aspect of it. And then you could decide what you were going to make.

And so, I would-- started off with the very vast project of making our Christmas cards on our dining room table. But I got interested in that and then found out that they were having a class at the Pasadena Art Museum. I said, oh! So, I called quickly, and I said, "are there any places left? Oh, could I please come?" And they said, "well, yes." "Would you like to sign up? Come on."

And so, I went and just-- it just welcomed me home. It was just perfect. Very, very nice. And I met another woman friend and I really, really at that time didn't really have many women friends. And so that was a very good start. And she also, as a mother of eight children, was deeply involved in psychotherapy. And so, we got talking about Jungian ideas and all that kind of thing. So that was kind of the start for a personal pilgrimage, I would say, for me.

And then it was a little-- it's sort of-- I think I took the class three times, because I didn't have any place to work. And so, at the last, I was fussing around and the-- Guy Williams was the teacher, and he came

over, and he says, well. He says, “you do know how to do this.” He says, “well now what's your imagery going to be?” And I mean, I thought, “what is he even talking about? I have no idea.”

But what he forced-- not forced me to do, but the question required me to examine my own life about what was my most important consideration at the time. And because it was just the beginning of feminism and that whole thing, and I just started focusing on what that might be like. And so that's, I think, how the male-female interest came into the work as a topic.

Joffrion: So, at this point, you've got children at home, and you discovered a love of art. You're primarily doing silk screening. You've met a mentor, Guy Williams, and some other folks that have led you into Jungian philosophy, which is starting to influence your work. Who are some other influential artists in that period for you that sort of helped you make that transition from mom at home to pursuing your love of art and passion for art?

Morris: Well, I think, and I'm not-- I can't be precise about this, but I think one of the things that really made a difference for me, at that time, the Pasadena Art Museum was in an old, old-- I don't know how to describe it exactly, but it's a building that a woman, who was extremely interested in oriental art and her collections had it turned over to have it become a teaching facility. And they had fantastic exhibits there.

So, the people who were on the move at that time, artists in the area were shown there, and I got to see that, because it was just right beside my door. And that was very influential to me. And I got to know a few of those people, but not really. I mean, I was just sort of terrified. But I could see that it had a progressive life, that you begin somewhere, and you can move on and see where it takes you. So that was very nice.

And then the other thing that happened was that as I began to do the silkscreen prints, I found out that there were competitions that you could send your prints, blah, blah, blah. And I was part of the Los Angeles Printmaking Society, so I met other people who were also doing the same thing.

And that was, at that time, mostly women. So, some of my long-term women friends are from that period. And so, I would-- and the other thing I learned, when you send in your stuff, you don't really know where you're sending it. You're just following the rules.

And 50% of the time, you get rejected, and 50% of the time, you get accepted. And I thought, oh, well that's the way things are. That's pretty cool. And that's a good lesson to learn early in an art career, because you certainly cannot depend on being accepted. So that was good.

Joffrion: Well, I'd like to shift gears and talk a little bit about your specific bodies of work. You have made dramatic transitions, I think, in using different formats in the way that you use materials in your art, from large scale pieces to smaller pieces later in your career. So, if I may, may I read something that you've written once.

Morris: Sure.

Joffrion: Just a brief quote.

Morris: Sure.

Joffrion: And maybe that'll set the stage for the trajectory of your art over time.

Morris: OK.

Joffrion: You shared this with me a couple of weeks ago. "The artist is the maker of his or her own map. The destination is unclear, but the persistence is absolute. Each corner reveals a lesson and a new problem to solve." (Sounds like your dad). "The presently unknown direction is the engine of the work. What we do not know fuels us. And giving form to what was previously hidden is the artist's tasks, the ladder steps to life and art making."

With that quote in mind, and I think it some ways really is a wonderful summary of this map without a destination concept that we've discussed previously, could you just kind of take us through some of your transitions as an artist?

Morris: Well, let's see. I don't really-- what keeps happening to me is I start working in a certain medium and I go along for a while. And then I get to a point where I feel as though within the context of that medium, I've said all I can say, or the problems get too difficult to solve. I don't know which. But one of the things that happened with the printmaking was I think this is-- you have to frame all this stuff, you have to go to this trouble, you have to lug it around. I don't think I want to do that anymore.

Then the other thing was that I had been using-- my imagery in the printmaking began to include images of water, and it began to include images of plants in relation. And then I finally got to the point where I understood a little bit about-- how do you even describe it? You can make prints from photographs. I've forgotten, there's a name for that.

Anyway, I decided to make a large piece with just a surface of the ocean that I had taken. And I don't know why, but I decided that I was going to make six prints. That single image was going to be broken down into six prints. And I would print each one separately and then they would be all joined together into something big.

So, when that happened, I thought, oh, now I have to frame this. What am I going to do? I mean, what if it isn't any good? It's going to cost me $600 to just frame the thing. No, no, I'm not going to do that. I'm going to just make just little, little envelopes to-- and tack them on the wall just to see. Well, six months later--

Joffrion: And filled them with water, yes.

Morris- Oh, no. Not yet. Not yet. Six months later, I finally figured out how to make those things. I had to buy a special thing, I had to buy molds. You had to put them under electricity, you had to melt the plastic. I mean, it was a nightmare. But I really had a good time. It was just really fun to do.

So anyway, I get this done. And I have all these little envelopes and I'm putting the prints into the envelopes. And I thought, "I am putting paper water into a container. Now why don't I try to put real water into this container?" And, so what happened was, and you can see this, obviously, that when you have a flat surface and you add something to it, it's no longer flat.

And, so what happened, in the right set of circumstances, the back would be flat, and the front would practically turn into a triangle. And so, I figured out-- I made a bunch of my-- the early pieces were almost shoe racks. A little pocket, another pocket right below, below, below, below. So, then I made-- I think, let's say it was six feet by six feet. And then I got the opportunity to show it at Caltech. And where-- it's hung. I'm over there. I don't have any idea what I'm doing. And it's there and it doesn't look like anything. And I said, "well, could we have some light? Could we turn on the lights?" And they turned on the lights and the surface of the water in that triangular container-- unit cast its own rainbow on the wall behind the piece. And I thought, oh my God. I can't. This is a miracle. I was so pleased I couldn't stand it.

So, then I just went on with that particular-- just figuring out how to form the vinyl into different shapes that would hold water. And there turned out to be a lot of ways you could do it. So, it was really quite a fun adventure.

Joffrion: And where did you go from there, from the shapes? I think I remember a trip to Nepal, perhaps, and some other things that happened in your life in the late '70s and early '80s that began to move you in a new direction.

Morris: I think I had the same problem with the water as I had with the silkscreen prints. Oh, it's so much trouble to make frames. So now it's with the water, the water has to be distilled. Otherwise, it gets moldy and you have a completely different set of circumstances. And I wanted everything to be as nearly transparent as possible.

And so it just got to be a lot of trouble. And so, somebody asked me, they commissioned a piece and I had to teach her how to change the water. I mean, it was just hopeless. And then I had the opportunity to show the pieces at the Pacific Security Bank in LA. A friend of mine put together a show and

Joffrion: That was 17 Contemporaries?

Morris: Yes, right. And I had to carry the water from my car in downtown Los Angeles wherever you could find a parking place. And I had these five-gallon containers of water and I had to carry them there and refill the water, because in the lobby of the bank, it just evaporated practically overnight.

And it was supposed to be dripping water. I mean, when the bags started to leak because I hadn't made them tight enough, I thought, well, all right. I'm going to make them leak. See what happens. So that's what we were doing. But I had a-- I had to have a-- I had to have a ladder, I had to carry these up the ladder, and then a ladder on the other side because this was in an enclosed box. And I had to go up and over and change the water.

So, I'm standing there at one time and this is an older woman came up, and she said, well, is the ladder part of the deal? No, it isn't. But it's necessary. So anyway, I finally-- I felt that I had done as much as I could do with that.

And so then a friend of mine came to my house. No, actually, it was my brother came to my house one evening and we were all sitting around after supper. And he says, well, I've decided I'm going to go on a hiking trip to Nepal. Do you want to come? Does anybody want to come? And I said, “I do!” And my husband said, “oh, I'm sorry, I'm too busy.” I said, “well, I'm going.”

Well, I mean, it totally changed my life. I had a vision, dream whatever of finding a horn, like a ram's horn or something like that. I mean, I don't know where that idea came from. And we're hiking, hiking, hiking, hiking, and all of a sudden, right at my foot, there was one. And here, what am I, thousands and thousands of miles from home? So, I quickly put it in my pack and brought it home. And I thought, this has got-- the circumstances are such that this has got to be significant.

So, I had a friend who taught me how to do work with plaster bandage. And so I wrapped it all up with a plaster bandage and I took it off, and I thought, oh, look, a three dimensional form can be made into a lightweight unit. And then you can move it around, and add and subtract, and do all this other stuff. So, I thought, OK, here we go. So, I initially made, using the horn, I had the horns and I thought, what am I going to do with them? I decided that I would try to make a helmet. Horns are worn by the animals. Maybe I could wear them.

So, I wrapped gauze bandage around my head and around the horn. And made a couple of masks, I would call them, but they weren't necessarily over the face. They were just on top of the head. And that was the starting place. And then I thought, well, what else could I do? So, then I decided, well, I was just going to plaster myself. And so I did that.

And so then you have a top, and a bottom, and an arm, and a leg, and all these disjointed parts. And I thought, well, now let's see. If you put those together, perhaps you could have a figure. I have no idea what I'm doing. So, I did finally do that. And finally, one day, I was able to make a figure that stood on its own. Well, It thought that's pretty interesting.

And so the idea just develops. The ideas come, and then you pursue them a little bit without any necessarily specific intention. And the work tells you where to go next. It was just terrific.

Joffrion: Was the next step for you adding natural materials to those plaster casts, or was the next step into the bronzes?

Morris: Oh, no, no. Somehow or other, the first efforts with the plaster casting-- I mean the bandage casting, almost everything had a natural object in it. And when I finally made the first piece that was parts of my body put together, I had had a dream when I moved my studio to downtown LA. And it was just this big, open space. Oh, my goodness. Now what am I going to do?

And I had this dream that there was an enormous pair of elk horns spinning in this space. Well, my goodness, what's that? Then the first cast that I did, she had to wear those horns, big fat horns on her head. And then she had to have a necklace. And the necklace was beans, or I don't know what. But anyway. So always the plant material addition kind of went with it.

And so then when I was able to make a full body that could stand, or sit, or whatever the posture was that I wanted, I would always coat them, cover them with some other material. And one of the early ones, I made a cast of my gentleman friend who was a fisherman. And I completely covered his body with salmon skins.

Joffrion: It's a wonderful piece, yeah.

Morris: So, it just kind of just went from there.

Joffrion: Right. Well, let's talk about the beginnings of the bronze work for which Sculpture Gardens is known, and how you got to doing that kind of form and using that particular format. This is yet again a big step and a big change for you in the artwork. - In the artwork you're producing.

Morris: Yeah. Well, a friend of mine-- well, I had finished a piece that involved four figures. And a friend came and said, well, now what are you going to do with it? And part of an artist's problem is you get a lot of work done and then now suddenly you're involved with inventory. What are you going to do with all this stuff?

So, what I said is, oh, I'm just going to put it out in the yard. Well, of course, it would have melted in our weather in the rain. And so my friend just very casually said, oh, well, why don't you do it in bronze? I said, I didn't even know what she's talking about. And I can't now remember how I met Tom Jay. And it was he, Tom, and his wife, Mol, who were the models for this four figured peace. And oh, by the way, he just happens to own a foundry.

I said, well, Tom, what do you think? Could we-- Well, yeah, he said we could. I'm not sure I want to be made out of bronze, but we could do that. And so--

Because I had-- but because I knew him, trusted him, he began to teach me how to-- what that process was like and what-- how it could be expanded, and went from there.

Joffrion: Was this Riverside Gallery? -I mean, foundry?

Morris: No, this was—Riverdog. Riverdog Fine Arts Foundry, and it was in Port Townsend. And he and his wife lived on the property and the foundry was on his property. And, so I would drive from here to Port Townsend probably once every two weeks for years.

Joffrion: I'm sure.

Morris: Getting all that work done. But I mean, it was-- but it was-- I mean, it was a process that was comfortable. I was working with another artist whom I trusted, who was willing to teach me what I didn't know. And so it didn't feel like anything but making. I didn't have any expectations for its future at all. Just, well, I wonder what'll happen next?

Joffrion: At this point, do you want to talk a little bit more about some of the specific pieces and maybe, then, the trajectory into the Bone Journey and Crossings? Or would you rather shift gears and talk a little bit about this place and the connection between the sculpture that we're talking about and the property here at Legoe Bay.

Morris: Well, I think at some point really what became of the large bronzes is how Sculpture Woods became a place. Because what would happen is I would make a piece. I had no idea where it was going to go, except that by then, I had built this studio. And so the properties surrounding it belonged to me and I could pick a spot. And inevitably I would walk around after the piece was finished and I would say, I think it needs to go here.

And so then those arrangements would be made and the ground would be dug up, and it would be planted in the ground. And then gradually the plants would grow around it and soften and welcome it. And then after a while, I can't remember how many pieces, I thought you know what? What I'm making here, whether I want to or not, is a place, as opposed to just a sculpture. And so that just gave me a larger view, and it actually, at some level, took pressure off me. Because an artist is always worrying about their reputation. Well, I had no reputation to maintain, so it was perfect.

So that's kind of how it happened. And then at a certain point, same thing happened with the bronze-- the large bronzes. i thought, I've done everything that I need to do at this scale. And so then I was up at my friend Charlie's (BAKER) house, his farm. And he's a farmer, a fisherman.

And I was out walking and all of a sudden, I ran into a sheep's rib cage. I said, look at that. Isn't that totally cool? So, I picked it up, took it home, and made a cast of the ribs. And I thought, well, now what? And for some reason, it just had to be held in a boat.

And so that first boat was a canoe-shaped piece. It was probably maybe close to three feet, maybe two and a half feet long, and then the ribs were just floating inside of it. And so then I thought, oh, well if you can do that, how about this? How about that?

And so the horns that were on the first plaster bandage piece, that whole image kept coming back. And the horn of the goat that I found in Nepal. I mean, so that the ideas keep staying in an artist's mind, and

then they can find a new avenue when it's time. That was-- and it was very nice to be able to make work that I could actually carry. I didn't have to hire trucks and forklifts, et cetera.

Joffrion: So now you moved into this period more of working with the era that you call the Crossing, and even now, as I saw last week, is continuing to evolve.

Morris: - Oh yeah.

Joffrion: Let's finish this one and then we'll come back to this place. Talk to me a little bit about some of the pieces that you've made more recently.

Morris: Well, just as I-- the rib cage that I found needed to be in a boat. And I got to the same place with those small pieces. I thought this is beginning to feel repetitive and I don't need to do more of these. But then I decided, OK, so I'm just going to make a boat out of whatever I can find. And I don't know why I picked it, but I had a piece of thin cork. And I cut the cork into strips and I made a boat out of this cork. And it was great, because it curved for the ribs and curved for the hull and whatnot.

And then you'd pick it up and it would wobble and change its shape. No, no, no. We can't have that. So I asked the foundry could they cast it, and they said, oh, no problem. So, they cast it. And I made-- I think they made one mold and I made six castings and then had them patina them in different colors. And then, of course, they had to be filled with natural objects. And so I would make a little-- something traveling in this boat that was maybe part of a bird head, part of a bird skull, a few feathers, sticks, and twigs.

So, then I can't quite decide-- I decided, I think, that I did not want heavy boats. Boats are supposed to be light. And so you have the constant problem when you're working with sticks and twigs and stuff is how are they going to hold still long enough for you to get any form out of it. And so I have a fabulous friend here on the island, we have very talented people living here. And he, in fact, is a boat maker.

And so I said, well, Jerry (Brown), do you think you could help me figure this out? And he says, no problem. What you need is a jig. I said, what's a jig? Well, it turns out that he was able to make one for me. And I figured out a method to do them.

And so I was able very easily to make the structure of a boat, the form, and then I would look around and see what needed to go with it. And that kept me busy for, what, seven years or so? I think I sort of change my modus every seven years. I don't know what that's all about.

But anyway, so then more time passes. And just recently I thought, well I think maybe I've made enough boats. And what else could I do? And I don't really know how I quite got to this idea, but I decided I wanted to make something vertical instead of horizontal.

And once again, I couldn't figure out how to fasten it, how to do it, how to do anything. But anyway, now we are in-- I'm in this business of making shelters. And I'm taking all the plant materials that I have,

the seaweed and whatnot that I have, and making them into shapes that will stand on their own and maybe have some little secret living inside.

Joffrion: That's wonderful.

Morris: So it's great fun.

Joffrion: Well, thank you for sharing your map without the destination that always seems to be based in problem solving. Thank you. An homage to your dad, I think, a little bit, too.

Morris: Yeah.

Joffrion: Yeah. Well, let's go back. We kind of jumped through the trajectory of your art from place to place. So you left California and you arrived in Lummi Island. Do you want to talk a little bit about that choice, to come to Lummi Island, and what drew you here? And then how you ended up at this place, the Sculpture Garden.

Morris: Yeah. Well, what happened was that when my brother and I went to Nepal, I mean, it really completely transformed my life, because what I realized is A, I had decided to go on this trip by myself. I mean, I was in my brother's company, but I wasn't wedded to my husband's hip. And the experience was just phenomenal.

I mean, it was just beyond explaining. And I began to have an understanding of myself as oh, you are an independent person. You could do whatever you wanted. I mean, you know what I mean. It's just you don't always have to be the mother and the housewife. And so I was in the process, then, of deeply considering leaving my husband. And that trip definitely made that decision available to me.

I realized that, yes, I could do that. And so I did two things at that time. I had-- before I went on the trip, I had a studio that I shared with my brother and then I decided to get a studio in downtown LA. And when I-- that was when I went on the trip to Nepal.

And when I came back, I said, well, you know what? I'm going to spend a couple of days a week overnight in my studio in downtown LA. My husband says, what? What do you mean? I said, well, I mean precisely what I just said. So anyway, we then began to work on our separation arrangements.

And I had a friend that I had met when I was in the Los Angeles Printmaking Society, Robin Vaccerino, who was also a very gifted artist, and we just had become extremely good friends. And she had been coming to Lummi Island for years as a guest of a friend of hers. And she always said, oh, I have to find a place. I have to find a place. She so she did. And once she found the place, and I was still in LA, she would come up for the summers. And the house needed everything. And so she said, come on, Ann. Come on up and help me. And I said, oh yeah, I'd love to.

So the first time I went up, I stayed for a week and we pulled all the old wallpaper off the walls, and we did this and that. And then so I came three summers in a row. The second summer, I was supposed to go on a hiking trip with my husband. I talked to him. And I called him up and said, you know what? I'm not going on the trip. I'm staying here.

So then the third summer, a house came-- I found out a house that was here for sale, and I thought, well, I'm going to ask the guy if he'll rent it to me for six weeks-- no, six months, and then I'll come and live here for that time. And if I really feel comfortable and I feel that I can meet people that I enjoy, I'll move. And so after six months, I bought the house and never left.

Joffrion: That's great.

Morris: Yeah. So it worked out very nicely.

Joffrion: So tell me a little bit more about Lummi Island and what captured you here. I mean, this is-- for some folks, especially coming from Southern California, this is fairly remote. Tell me a little bit about what captured your imagination here.

Morris: Well, I think there are two things that have something to do with that. One is that my family, my great grandmother built a cottage on the edge of Narragansett Bay in Rhode Island. And so as children, we got to go there and be by the water, and enjoy that totally. And also in Vermont, my father's brother, my uncle, had a farm.

Well, when I was little, going to the farm was just the end of the world wonderful. You could feed the horses. They could saddle-- I mean, tie the horses up to the wagon. You could go around. They were making maple syrup. I mean, the whole thing was just beyond wonderful. And so I think those kinds of influences were already in my mind about how I was attracted to a landscape.

And so when I moved here, I really felt that what I had done is returned to Vermont. I mean, we're in the same latitude, same kind of temperature, adjacent to the water. So I just felt that I was home. And I felt that, as a single person, I could cope. Which was important.

Joffrion: Yeah. I understand.

Well, let's talk about-- I know folks that use this in the future are going to be so interested in how this particular place came to be, the evolution of the studio and the way that you've come to understand the property. You've talked a little bit about how each sculpture fit exactly the place where you found it and ultimately placed it. But let's talk a little bit about conceptualizing the studio, the architects you've worked with, some of the found objects, perhaps, that-created this place.

Morris: - Yeah.- Yeah.

Well, what happened initially when I first moved here, I met my gentleman friend. It seems to be the pattern. In any event, he and I built a building together on his property, and that's where I first had my

studio for a 10-year time. And he had sisters and his mother living on the property as well. And they wanted to be a little certain that I was trustworthy.

And so we had an agreement that after 15 years of owning that building, the property would revert back to their family, which is totally fine. So as that time approached, I was walking around my own neighborhood and this particular property where Sculpture Woods now is-- used to be a shortcut from where my house was through the woods over to where the fire hall now exists. And one day I was driving by and it says, for sale. I said, what?

So I jumped out of my car, came over and found out about this. And I thought that it was the whole property that you walk all the way through. And that probably would have been 20 acres. and I found out, oh, it was only 14 acres. I'm having it. I'm having it. And so the first year that I was here I had no place to work and I was still working at the other studio. And we had a huge, huge, huge windstorm. And about an acre of trees fell just flat on the property. I mean, a huge mess.

So the first year, I got some help and we spent the whole year doing two things. One, is making a woodshed, and the other is chopping up all the wood so that it could be stored. And by then, I was able to spend time here. There was an old building here on the property that it was just in nasty shape. And I thought, well, I mean, why don't we fix that up?

And so in doing that, I found out about this wonderful architect who lives on the island, David Nesbit. And we just hit it off. I mean, we think similarly, we have the same artistic sense. And so that seemed like a great idea. And so then when all the wood was cleared away, I thought, oh. Now I don't have to cut down any trees to build a studio. Where should it go? And so you keep wandering around, and one night I brought my sleeping bag and slept out in the woods down below so that I could get a sense.

So anyway, the place where this building currently is just seemed the right spot. And so guess who I asked to be the architect. And I told him-- he said, well, what is it actually that you want? And I said, well, I want as much space as I had up at Charlie's, and I had him come up there and look around. And I said, however, I want it all on one floor and 10% bigger. So, he says, OK.

Then he brought me his drawings, he drew-- I think probably maybe three sets of drawings. And one set had this fabulous fireplace. And he knew where to get all these remarkable stones. And then he made a breezeway, because what I had decided that I wanted was a separate space and a studio space. Because who knows, maybe I needed an assistant, and the assistant needs to live here, or maybe I would want to live here. Whatever. So anyway, that's what we did. And the breezeway separated those two spaces. So that's how it all happened.

Joffrion: What's the story of these beams?

Morris: Well, what happened when I was making the studio up at Charlie's, a dock was being dismantled in Bellingham. And big news, you can go down and get used wood if you want to. We rushed down and got used wood to build the second-- the loft area of my studio at Charlie's building.

Now I'm liking the way old wood looks, and little paint here and a little this and that. And so I asked Nesbit if there was any possibility of getting used wood. And he said, oh yeah, there is. And was an outfit called Duluth Timber. You could get in touch with them and say, this is what we need. Do you have it available? And at the time, they did.

Joffrion: Wonderful.

Morris: Yeah. And it was at the same time that Bill Gates was building his house and he used those same materials. And yet, he decided that he didn't like the old look, and he had them all refashioned so that it looked like new wood. No, no, no, no, no. We're not doing that. Anyway, that's how it started.

Joffrion: Is there anything else you want to share about the development of this space, or the use of the other piece of property down below? I know it's being used currently as a yoga studio, at least prior to COVID, but.

Morris: Yeah, Yeah. And I am not really sure why I decided to remodel that building. It was just already here and it was a problem to solve. And I really enjoyed working with Dave. And so then once it was done, there was no specific use for it. And once this studio was finished, I really didn't need that space. And so-- actually, let's see. How did that work?

Oh, I was going to go on another long, long hiking trip. And I thought, am I in shape to do this? And I found out that Constance Drake was living here on the island, and she taught yoga. I knew nothing about yoga. And she didn't either. She was just a brand-new teacher. So we learned a few things together and we did our exercises down there. And so that turned out to be very nice. And so she said, well, if you're not using this building, can I have classes here? And I said, yes.

It really worked out nicely, because part of the deal was she got to use that space for her classes, but it was her job to keep it tidy and do the cleaning a little bit, and keep it in order. And it was-- so it worked out to be very beneficial for both of us.

Joffrion: You've mentioned, and I think others have mentioned, that this is reminiscent of a Native longhouse.

Morris: Mm-hmm.

Joffrion: And maybe that wasn't the initial concept, but I was wondering if you would speak to that. And, also any other aspect of Indigenous influences on your art or this space.

Morris: Well, I think there are a couple. When I moved out of the studio up the Charlie's and was thinking about this-- no, I guess it was-- I was-- I can't remember exactly what the timing was. But in any event, Scott Jensen, my friend, is an incredibly gifted carver. And he is Danish, but was making beautiful, beautiful Native American imagery and thoroughly researched all the details of how it was actually

done, what the real colors were supposed to be, et cetera, et cetera. And so then he got a divorce and was working in a little rental studio and working in the bathroom.

And I said, Scott, no, no, no. This is not a good thing. You need to come and use the space that I left at Charlie's and work here. He says, oh, OK. Well, anyway, that happened. And then when this building was being built, I thought, well, why don't I commission him to do a totem pole for me?

He says, what a great idea. And the thing that was cool is that the dimensions of the pole that needed to fit this spot were just about big enough to be accommodated in that building. And so that you could figure out how you were going to turn the pole around and get it out the front door when you're finished.

And then, I can't remember whether it was before or after, but anyway, for 10 years, 10 summers in a row, we have mutual friends who owned a boat. And we commissioned our friend to take us to Southeast Alaska and North to visit the various Native American abandoned sites.

And what Scott had done at a very early time, I mean, he was probably 19 or something. I don't know how he quite got himself up there, but he was asked to teach up there. And so he began to know people, and to know how to find this place and the next place.

And Scott's the kind of person that, instead of going to school when he was supposed to go to school, he would constantly be up in the mountains hunting, exploring here, exploring there, and he has a very good spatial memory about where things are in the world. And so we just had a fabulous time with him. And so he would bring a carving project on the boat. We would each be-- we'd be out on the bow cutting away chips and they're climbing everywhere.

And I got a very, very deep attachment to those Native forms, but I also said to myself, I am under no circumstances going to try to copy any of those forms. I want that influence to walk with me, but I am not going there in my work. And I had fortunately been able to manage that.

So that was great.

Joffrion: Let's shift gears a little bit and talk about the decision of you and your family to donate this property to Western and talk a little bit about how that decision came to be, and where you see this going in the future.

Morris: Well, for a long time, I thought, well, what's going to happen to this property when I die? And I realized, look, it's full of heavy objects. I have all these small bronzes. It's just units of things to dispose of. What are my children going to do? I, of course, didn't ask them. But it just seemed to me to be a huge burden for them. If some solution wasn't achieved. Lots of years were spent with me, lots of friends, a few professional people. What could we do?

Well, we thought, oh, well maybe we could move the pieces here. Maybe we could do-- I mean, and every single other place that was even remotely considered was unsatisfactory. The pieces, from my point of view, needed to remain here. And so then I had a friend who said, well, what you need to do is try to find an institution that could afford to keep them here, and you would need something that had some possibility of reserves in the bank so that a future could be actually realized.

And so that person was Pamela Belyea. She and her husband had started the Gage Foundation of Art in Seattle. And she was in a career change position, and she wanted to take classes in advanced education, because she wanted to be a principal of the school or something. Anyway, she didn't have any money. And so she said, I'll tell you what. I'll help you solve this problem. You pay my tuition. I said, fine.

So that's what we did. And in the meantime, then, she got to know some of the people at the university. And she met Sonja Sather and the conversations began to occur. And yeah, yeah, yeah. And so people kept coming. And at that particular time, an artist friend of mine, Mary Froderberg, her husband was assistant to the then President of the university. And so he says, well, yeah, we'll try to get her over here, and da-da-da. Well, she could not have been less interested. I mean, completely uninterested.

So he said, OK, that's a bad idea. But anyway, but the idea of Western stayed on the plate. And when-- let's see, how did that work? Oh, I know. Who-- I've forgotten who the curator was before Hafthor (Yngvason).

Joffrion: Sarah Clark-Langager.

Morris: Sarah Clark-Langager. She could not-- and she was so totally uninterested. And so I thought, well, OK. We keep running into dead ends. And so when she retired, it turned out that Hafthor was interested. I mean, his Scandinavian-- he's not Scandinavian background, but Icelandic background. I think my imagery that appeared, I think, to Sarah is just of clunky, old fashioned, not breaking ground.

He said, oh no, this is interesting. Anyway, things proceeded. And by then, I had already given the property to my children. And so then the conversations had to start about whether my children were willing to give the property away. And they were not wildly enthusiastic.

But what we were able to do in the arrangement with Western was put in an agreement that my family, whether it's the kids, grandchildren, whomever, could work with them to-- with the university to come here for two weeks every year if they wished, and all those conditions were set up so that they didn't have to abandon it altogether, but they didn't have to be responsible for it. And they came to see that it was a good idea.

Joffrion: Great. Yeah. Good.

Morris: And my son was the most reluctant because he's in real estate and getting rid of property is just not his thing. He wants to acquire property. But he has come to see that it's a very good arrangement. And then, I began to meet people like yourself, Stephanie (Bowers), Hafthor, Kit (Spicer).

And so that I just-- my world enlarged by knowing these other people who were part of that academic unit. And so I just felt blessed. It was just really very wonderful. And so how they are going to officially use it, fortunately I do not have to decide.

Joffrion: I know it's envisioned as a place of creativity and a place of retreat, which I think it's historically been for you.

Morris: Yes, for sure.

Joffrion: And so I think this will be stewarded by Western for generations. And I think generations of students that will visit out here and work, and others that are affiliated with the University. Do you have any message that you would like to give to students of the future that may visit this place? It doesn't have to be anything dramatic, but if you wanted to let them know something about this place, what would it be?

Morris: Well, I am a great believer in silence as part of the creative process. I am a great believer in uninterrupted use of space. And hopefully either students in groups or singly, or faculty in groups or singly could have that experience here. That they would come with an intention to do something that they have always wanted to do, but they're not quite sure what it is.

And that hopefully in the quiet and in the space, that idea can begin to be developed. And obviously it's not going to happen within a week. But I mean, if opportunities-- I think sometimes experiences are extremely formative. That if you have an opportunity to see yourself in a different context, that new possibilities absolutely do develop. And so I'm hoping that maybe a young Einstein will come and recreate the world.

Joffrion: A problem solver.

Morris: A problem solver.

Joffrion: That's wonderful. Ann, is there anything that I haven't asked you or that we haven't covered that you'd like to add to the record here?

Morris: Well, I just-- one of the things I would like to add to the record is my deep appreciation of Western's willingness to do this. Because it has been-- I mean, everyone says, oh, it's so great of you to give the gift, blah, blah, blah. Well, that may be true.

(Sounds of Ann Morris's dog, Lily)

But the opposite is also true. My life work has a home. That doesn't often happen to artists. And their life work is just-- your family buys a storage unit and that's where it lives forever, and then they're embarrassed because they don't want to throw it away. So I am deeply grateful for the whole thing. And so if it's been good for me, I can't see why it won't be good for others.

Joffrion: A problem solved again. Well, it's been wonderful to talk with you and your gift to Western is going to mean so much to so many people for so many years to come.

Morris: I hope so. I hope so. - Yeah.

Joffrion: It's already been a great deal to those of us who've had a chance to visit here, even for a brief period of time.

Morris: Well, I'm very glad.